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STATI

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CITY

SUBJECT Full Text PART I, II, III

SENATOR FRANK CHURCH: Have you brou
of those devices which would have enabled the
poison for...

WILLIAM COLBY: We have indeed.

SENATOR CHURCH: ...for killing peop

COLBY: The round thing at the top i
sight. It works by electricity. There's a ba
and it fires a small dart.

SENATOR CHURCH: And the dart itself
the target, does the target know that he's abo
and about to die?

COLBY: A special one was developed
would be able to enter the target without perc

SENATOR CHURCH: As a murder instrument, that's about as efficient as you can get, isn't it?

COLBY: It is a weapon, a very serious weapon.

[Visual of excerpt from Doolittle Report]

DAVID ATLEE PHILLIPS: A secret organization is a risk in any society. I believe it's a risk that we must take for the net gain, because I believe it's always going to be there.

Now, let's say that we abolish the CIA. It's done so many [illegible]. Let's don't ever have this kind of intell

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TIME
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Debacle in The Desert

Carter's mission to rescue the hostages goes down in flames

Two lines of blue lights etched the outlines of the remote landing strip. Suddenly flames illuminated the night sky, then gradually flickered out. On the powdery sands of Dasht-e-Kavir, Iran's Great Salt Desert, lay the burned-out hulk of a lumbering U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft. Nearby rested the scorched skeleton of a U.S. Navy RH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter. And in the wreckage were the burned bodies of eight American military air crewmen.

A few hours later, in a display of whipped-up outrage, the Iranian air force dispatched American-made F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers to blast the ruins of the charred aircraft and to disable four other undamaged Sea Stallions abandoned by the U.S. Ironically, as the rubble bounced, one Islamic Guard patrolling the site was killed and two others wounded.

The fire and the fury dramatized the dimensions of a new American tragedy—the inability of the U.S. to extricate 53 American hostages held by Iranian militants and the unstable, faction-torn government of Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini. In a startlingly bold but tragic gamble, President Jimmy Carter had ordered a courageous, specially trained team of American military commandos to try to pluck the hostages out of the heavily guarded U.S. embassy in Tehran. The supersecret operation failed dismally. It ended in the desert staging site, some 250 miles short of its target in the capital city. And for the world's most technologically sophisticated nation, the reason for aborting the rescue effort was particularly painful: three of the eight helicopters assigned to the mission developed electrical or hydraulic malfunctions that rendered them useless.

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One of the many ironies of the entire mission was the fact that the C-130s were heading for a remote spot in the desert that the Iranians had feared might some day be used by U.S. forces. Indeed, they even had a map of the spot. It was discovered in the papers of Mahmoud Jaafarian, a pro-Shah counterinsurgency strategist who was executed after the revolution a year ago. Jaafarian was actually trying to burn the map when he was seized by the revolutionaries. Jaafarian told his captors that the staging site had been secretly built by the CIA, with the Shah's knowledge, for possible emergency use. The Iranian air force proposed destroying the site, suspecting it might contain hidden navigational gear that could guide landing American planes. But so confused was the Iranian government that nothing was done about the matter. When an Iranian officer insisted upon a decision, he was told by one official: "The Americans must know the site is discovered. They won't ever consider using it."

Now the [redacted] were still great worries. Would the emotional militants at the U.S. embassy carry out their threats to kill the American hostages once they learned that an attempt had been made to free them by force? Would the mobs in Tehran go on any new rampage? How would the allies react? What about Soviet leaders? Just how much of the secret rescue plans could still be protected—and who might yet be hurt if they were not?

The President and his men moved into the larger Cabinet Room and sat down to a dinner of sandwiches. As they talked about limiting the damage, they were joined by Turner, who had been following the unfolding events from his CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. While Carter telephoned some foreign leaders and key members of Congress, Vance directed his staff at the State Department to get ready to inform the relatives of the hostages. The meeting ended at midnight, but each participant returned to his own office to work on into the night.

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The aftermath of the mission that had come to a bloody and unsuccessful end in an Iranian desert left conflicting feelings high in the ranks of the Administration that planned it. Some State Department officials felt that the whole venture had been badly timed—that it should have been either launched months ago, or postponed until later in the spring, after the U.S. had determined the success of the sanctions imposed by its allies. Said Richard Helms, former CIA chief and onetime Ambassador to Iran: "The timing is peculiar. You spend so much effort getting your allies to take some other line of approach. And just when you seem to be succeeding, you pull this caper."

But Carter's top aides remained confident that the mission had been well worth trying. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," said one. "I have no regrets. If we could replay history, I would do it again."

Carter now has to rely even more on the power of economic sanctions to force Iran to give up the hostages. But the President made it clear in his extraordinary address to the nation on Friday morning that he is not about to rule out resorting to arms against a nation that ignores international law and defies the world. ■

EXCERPTED